

# The Power and Utility of Reflective Learning Portfolios in Honors

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## LEARNING PORTFOLIOS IN HIGHER EDUCATION

The explosive growth of learning portfolios in higher education as a compelling tool for enhanced student learning, assessment, and career preparation is a sign of the increasing significance of reflective practice and mindful, systematic documentation in promoting deep, meaningful, transformative learning experiences. The advent of sophisticated electronic technologies has augmented the power of portfolios and created a virtual industry dedicated to platforms and strategies associated with electronic portfolios and the diverse purposes they can serve in curricular, programmatic, and institutional assessment efforts. Today, the substantial and still growing literature on electronic portfolios has taught us the capabilities of digital media to offer students a robust and flexible mechanism for not only collecting multiple types of selective evidence of their learning but also engaging in a critically reflective process that helps them understand, integrate, connect, apply, and develop the metacognitive habits and skills we associate with higher-order learning.

The intellectual and practical relevance of such innovations in the honors context is clear. Honors programs and colleges often struggle to identify and supply evidence of the value added to honors students' education, a challenge that is not easily or adequately met by standard measures such as tests, surveys, or essays. The portfolio, on the other hand, provides a vehicle for bringing together judiciously selected samples of students' work and achievements inside and outside the classroom for authentic assessment over time. A typical learning portfolio may include both academic materials and personal profiles and may designate some of its contents as public or private. Designed to prompt insight and discovery, a well-constructed, comprehensive portfolio

will contain items that fall into the following general categories, which are suggestive rather than prescriptive or complete because a portfolio should represent the individuality of the student:

1. *Philosophy of Learning* (reflective narrative[s] on learning process, learning preferences, strengths and challenges, value of learning, personal profile);
2. *Achievements in Learning* (records: transcripts, course descriptions, résumés, honors, awards, internships, tutoring);
3. *Evidence of Learning* (direct outcomes: research papers, critical essays, field experience logs, creative displays/performances, data/spreadsheet analyses, course online forum entries, lab research results);
4. *Assessment of Learning* (instructor feedback, course test scores, exit/board exams, lab/data reviews, research project appraisals, practicum/internship supervisor reports);
5. *Relevance of Learning* (practical applications, leadership, relation of learning to personal and professional domains, ethical/moral growth, affiliations, hobbies, volunteer work, affective value of learning); and
6. *Learning Goals* (response to feedback; plans to enhance, connect, and apply learning; career ambitions). (Zubizarreta, *Learning Portfolio* 22)

More importantly, the focus on reflection and on the vital mentoring that is needed to introduce and sustain what has come to be known widely as “folio thinking” helps the student to address a number of critical questions about his or her own learning (Chen and Black). Such questions can provide crucial information about the unique characteristics and value of the honors experience:

- What have I learned? Why did I learn?
- When have I learned most? Least? In what circumstances? Under what conditions?
- How have I learned or not, and do I know what kind of learner I am?
- How does what I have learned fit into a full, continual plan for continual learning?
- Where, when, and how have I engaged in integrative learning? Has my learning been connected and coherent?
- Is my learning relevant and applicable?

- When, how, and why has my learning surprised me?
- What have been the proudest highlights of my learning? The disappointments?
- In what ways is what I have learned valuable?
- What difference has honors learning made in my intellectual, personal, and ethical development?

One important takeaway lesson here is that “portfolio thinking” involves more than knowing content information, accumulating credits, and earning grades. Knowledge and performance are fundamental and desirable goals for a student’s undergraduate pursuits but are not enough to help students become reflective learners who can understand and evaluate themselves as “lifelong” and “lifewide” learners (Chen 29). The learning portfolio, then, becomes more than a product, a simple repository of artifacts; it becomes a process of reflection, of organizing, prioritizing, analyzing, and communicating one’s work and its value, which may prompt insights and goals that align with the mission and objectives of an honors program or college (Zubizarreta, “Learning Portfolio” 124). Add the practical benefits of the electronic portfolio in creating a multi-faceted, multi-media resource that gives a rich picture of a student’s academic and personal development over the course of a class, a program, a major, or a complete undergraduate career, and we see why many individual instructors, directors, departments, and institutions are adopting portfolios to improve and assess student learning and program or institutional effectiveness.

Honors can reap these same benefits, and an increasing number of honors programs and colleges are incorporating portfolio work in their courses and assessment plans. Models of both paper and electronic portfolios in honors from diverse institutions are readily available (see Appendix A).

The honors program’s electronic portfolio project at Minnesota State University, Mankato, offers an example of a thoughtful, well-planned effort to engage students in meaningful portfolio work. A great part of the project’s success comes from developing clearly defined competencies for Minnesota State Mankato honors students and faculty during the academic redesign phase, then emphasizing reflection as the core principle of sound portfolio development, and finally tapping its efficacy in providing useful information for program assessment. The Minnesota State Mankato portfolio has begun to transform student learning, enrich students’ preparation for post-baccalaureate education or careers, and strengthen the program’s assessment plan through multi-sourced evidence of its impact on students and on the institution. This essay contributes to the research on portfolios in higher education

by focusing on a single program's shift toward competency-based learning within an honors context.

## **SHIFTING TO THE HONORS PORTFOLIO DURING CURRICULUM REDESIGN**

Faculty at Minnesota State Mankato redesigned the honors curriculum in 2008–2009. From the beginning, the designers agreed that the program redesign process should serve as an incubator for curriculum experimentation across the university while complementing the institution's perceived strengths, fields of study, and institutional goals.

After meetings with various stakeholders—including students, faculty, alumni, business owners and political leaders—faculty designers decided to focus the program on key learning outcomes, or competencies. Prospective employers told us that they admired our students' knowledge and skills related to professional fields, but that they had hoped our graduates would be better able to work in teams, take charge of important projects, and effectively lead groups of people. Trends in global markets and immigration patterns also evidenced the need for students to navigate intercultural relationships in their communities and work places to an extent not seen in previous decades (Friedman; Moodian; Reimers; Rhoads and Szelenyi).

For these reasons, the faculty believed that honors education at Minnesota State Mankato should focus on developing demonstrable leadership and intercultural skills in addition to strong inquiry, research, and presentation skills, long the hallmarks of a successful honors education. We moved in this direction because the university has no major course of studies focused exclusively on leadership or global citizenship, yet, like most institutions of higher education, our diverse academic and student activity programs have much to offer in the development of these skills. At the same time, the three skill sets—leadership, research, and global citizenship—could complement the students' major fields of study. In essence, the process of redesign (the consultations with stakeholders) and the outcome (a renewed focus on interdisciplinary competencies that includes the traditional liberal arts and remains relevant to today's employment market) provide a potential rejoinder to vocal public criticisms about the inability of university departments and programs to meet the changing needs of contemporary society (Bok; Bowen, Chingos, and McPherson; Grafton; Taylor).

All future courses and co-curricular experiences, then, would be vetted through this tripartite lens of leadership, research, and global citizenship. We then faced the question of how the students would demonstrate their skills in these areas. Our stakeholders were emphatic about the importance of moving beyond GPA and credit completion as marks of success, and increasing

numbers of faculty were intrigued by the discussions about competency-based education that occurred in the late 1990s (Voorhees; Cambridge; Jones, Voorhees, and Paulson).

Focusing on competencies allowed the faculty to come to a shared understanding of learning goals for the program, leading us toward a common language and process for assessment without overly limiting the flexibility inherent in successful honors programs. The emphasis on competencies has other benefits that include creating a framework, a “story” for a program’s conversations with external audiences, and assisting in the formation of a community of scholars with a shared purpose. Finally, establishing clear and transparent competencies “enables sharing power with students” (Cambridge 52), a characteristic that many faculty members consider fundamental to honors education.

The literature on the subject suggests that competencies-focused projects take years to establish and often require multiple small steps and consistent evaluation to determine if this approach to learning is working. The faculty at Alverno College, an institution widely regarded as having one of the most developed ability-based programs in the nation, readily acknowledges that their mini-steps toward curricular change have taken nearly three decades to develop (7–13).

## THE BENEFITS OF PORTFOLIOS IN THE HONORS CONTEXT

The honors faculty’s focus on competencies and demonstrations gradually moved our redesign committee to consider the usefulness of student learning portfolios (Banta; Stefani, Mason, and Peglar; Zubizarreta, *Learning Portfolio*). Student learning portfolios are collections of student work accompanied by personal reflections that consider what they learned, how their learning has changed over time, and how their learning might be applied in different contexts (Zubizarreta, *Learning Portfolio* xxiv). Portfolios can be developmental in that they track student learning over the course of their educations; they can also be used as demonstrations when students choose their best work to showcase as evidence of competency completion or, more significantly, as evidence of their skills for prospective employers and graduate schools.

We eventually achieved consensus that, for three main reasons, portfolios might allow demonstrations that make the traditional transcript/grade/credit model appear obsolete. First, portfolios demonstrate student work beyond the mere grade. Because students archive examples of their work, they can review it to track their learning over the course of a semester or several years. Second, while transcripts focus only on credit-bearing courses, a portfolio

allows inclusion of co-curricular components of a student's learning, such as participation in campus and community clubs, organizations, and service activities as well as paid employment. Evidence to this effect could be provided in the form of personal photographs, minutes of meetings that tested leadership skills or the ability to work in groups, performance reviews by advisors or employers, and, most significantly, personal reflections. The third reason for portfolios is that, with proper structure and mentoring, they can serve as effective spaces for personal reflection and integration of learning across the student experience, in and outside of the lecture hall, seminar room, and lab (Huber and Hutchings 5–7; Kuh 28). The process of creating a portfolio—of choosing among artifacts and explaining one's choices, of sensing connections between various learning activities, and of assessing one's progress in relation to learning outcomes—fosters deep metacognitive skills that normally take years to develop (Loacker; Moon, *Learning Journals*; Moon, *Reflection*; Yancey, *Reflection*; Yancey, "Reflection"; Zubizarreta, *Learning Portfolio* 3–16).

Once the benefits of using portfolios became clear, the committee decided that the student portfolio, not the traditional honors thesis, would henceforth serve as the honors capstone project. Student demonstrations of skills in leadership, research, and global citizenship would be embedded within their portfolios, and portfolio development would be introduced in the honors first-year seminar. Evidence of mastery of such skills can vary but are likely to include demonstrated leadership in campus or community organizations (for leadership), undergraduate research or creative work supervised by a faculty mentor and followed by public dissemination of results (for research), and acquisition of second-language competency and understanding of diverse cultures through engagement with such populations either through a study abroad or a significant intercultural experience at home in the United States (for global citizenship).

Our faculty shared a broad consensus about the benefits and challenges of electronic and paper portfolios, and the prevailing assumption was that portfolios would be electronic (Cambridge, Cambridge, and Yancey; Chen and Light; Herrington and Oliver). Electronic portfolios appear to offer advantages in ease of use, storage, adaptability, and flexibility. The electronic environment allows the incorporation of various media types, including images, sound, and video, and it allows the portfolio to be linked to other online communities of the student's choice, thus enriching the portfolio by placing it within a wider context. While our students are adept at establishing a social presence on the web, they have much less experience creating a professional lens through which others might view them, and electronic portfolios helped them create such a lens. Our state context also led us in the

direction of electronic portfolios. The state of Minnesota was also a fruitful context for electronic portfolios; it was an early advocate of free web presence for all its citizens, and, by the time we considered using portfolios, eFolioMinnesota had already been established as a viable option within the Minnesota State Colleges and Universities system (Olson, Schroeder, and Wasko). The staff at MnSCU offered helpful advice as we moved through the implementation process. So far, our students have embraced the electronic portfolio model, perhaps because they can choose to leave their portfolios private. One could, however, clearly enjoy similar pedagogical and metacognitive benefits from a traditional paper model.

Even in the brief time this approach has been implemented, many faculty members believe that the new focus on competencies and portfolio demonstrations has significantly altered the honors experience in two significant ways. First, the program feels more actively tied to its mission than before the redesign. Administrative decisions are guided by the honors competencies. When faced with financial decisions, such as a request to co-sponsor a campus event or speaker, the governing faculty council and director look to the competency areas to make effective choices; courses and most program-sponsored co-curricular activities are designed to foster development in at least one of the three areas. When courses are proposed, the faculty members indicate the extent to which their course will develop select honors competencies, and they identify significant demonstrations of these competencies that students will be able to propose as artifacts for their portfolios once the course is completed.

Second, the mentoring and advising experience has significantly changed. To maintain their status in the program, students must submit an annual personal learning plan to the program office by the end of September. The learning plan must indicate the extent to which students expect to develop their leadership, research, and global citizenship skills over the course of the year and how they will demonstrate successful achievement of their curricular and co-curricular goals. Students are encouraged to include other goals related to their major course of study or work. Some students include more personal matters, such as their physical fitness or spiritual development. Program staff and faculty then meet with each student during the fall semester to review their goals and curriculum. Although we believe we can follow this advising model with 150–200 students overall, larger enrollment would require further staff assistance than our current full-time honors director, half-time administrative assistant, and graduate assistant.

Students' learning plans and goals change, and mentoring must be flexible. New opportunities, unforeseen in August or September, emerge during the course of a year. We believe that the process of creating a plan is more



significant than worrying about whether each specified component is carried out. During the academic year, especially during the winter and spring breaks, we encourage students to collect evidence of their work, select the most significant examples of their development, and reflect on their growth over the course of the year. At the end of May, we request that all students make their portfolios available to the program office by providing electronic access passwords, and during the first week of June the director and three faculty council members review the portfolios and provide an assessment of each student's progress. We take a day to align our expectations and use of the rubrics, then divide up the work, and send assessments to students later that month. The faculty members use the assessments to identify any mechanical or presentation issues in the portfolios; they identify the approximate development level that the artifacts demonstrate, from emerging to mastering; and they offer appropriate praise and suggestions for improvement. The assessment is holistic; no grades are used in the process. Ideally, students use the faculty feedback on their portfolios to inform the following year's learning plan, thereby increasing the complexity of their demonstrations over time.

This mentoring and advising process occurs each year until students take the Senior Portfolio seminar, which has two major goals. First, students revise their portfolios to ensure that they have the proper demonstrations of necessary competencies. Second, the instructor guides the students toward moving away from developmental portfolios, where students focus on themselves as learners, to demonstration portfolios, where students focus on their best work with an eye toward the job search process. The portfolios can be taken with them anywhere they go, and students can adapt them according to their own needs after graduation.

Time and resources are significant variables to consider, and we will undoubtedly face both challenges in the near future. However, many of the artifacts included in the portfolio have already been vetted, reviewed, and graded in classes. The portfolio assessment occurs at a more global level beyond the embedded assessment in courses. The amount of work in reviewing portfolios is significant, but rubrics, collaboration among faculty, and embedded assessment make the job manageable and worthwhile.

## **TROUBLESHOOTING THE PROCESS**

In constructing a program focused on competency demonstrations and portfolios, we encountered several problems, some of which are unsurprising to faculty and administrators who have overseen academic redesign. One problem arose from implementing competencies, rubrics, and evaluations of demonstrations that sounded great in a faculty conference committee but presented hurdles in real life. While we had clear goals in our competency-based



approach, some paths that students could use to reach the goals were intentionally vague. As a result, we quickly discovered that our honors students, and indeed some of our faculty, prefer clear and precise goalposts as they approach a problem. Even today, many faculty and most students are unfamiliar with the language of competencies and rubrics, and the idea that multiple demonstrations might meet the same competency is confusing to some, horrifying to others. Some students and faculty do not readily see value in reflection and consider the project an extra burden. For honors faculty acclimated to teaching “content,” articulating how their course helps to develop competencies while also attending to the development of students’ metacognitive skills can be frustrating.

A related issue arose with the rubrics themselves. The faculty designers created unnecessarily complex rubric statements, making them difficult for students to understand. Indeed, to some faculty our honors course proposals begin to look like general-education learning outcomes on steroids. A further problem has been that our leadership rubrics, again designed in faculty committee rooms, did not align well with actual student demonstrations.

The net result of having identified these problems is that we are revising and clarifying rubrics with student assistance, and we are finding more effective means to have students articulate their understanding of the competencies earlier in their program of study. All students enrolled in Honors First Year Seminar, for example, complete the course having spent weeks discussing leadership, research, and global citizenship. They all compose personal reflective essays on the subjects and then include them in the first rendition of their portfolios. We have developed a student handbook and will be creating podcasts for students who do not have time to attend sessions about developing their portfolios.

To help the faculty, we have offered honors orientations and development seminars on portfolio and reflective learning strategies. Modeling successful examples of embedding the portfolio into courses has probably been the best way to reduce faculty anxiety. We have streamlined the course proposal process while allowing the better honors syllabi and student portfolios to serve as examples for others; we offer examples of student portfolios through our website <<http://www.mnsu.edu/honors>>, and faculty receive examples of course syllabi upon request.

## PRELIMINARY OUTCOMES

Despite the hurdles, two unexpected benefits have emerged through the redesign. First, at least anecdotally, we believe the sense of community among students and faculty is far deeper than in previous renditions of the program. The program is designed not for all high-performing students at

Minnesota State Mankato but for those who readily accept the significance of developing skills not just in research but in global citizenship and intercultural awareness. The faculty select the students, at least in part, based on their interest in studying global cultures and in developing skills in a second language. Students who embrace these challenges tend to enjoy attending the same cultural events and lectures and to enroll in similar courses.

Second, we believe that we have more real-time updates of our students' progress through our program than in a program that relies on credit completion and honors thesis capstone requirements alone. From an enrollment management perspective, we have the very important benefit of often identifying retention and completion issues in students' first or second year in the program; early on we can spot students who fail to submit a learning plan or show little development in their portfolio from one year to the next or make little progress toward their language competency. Moreover, aggregate data compiled from the individual annual portfolio assessments can identify weaknesses in program offerings or problems in communication with the students and faculty. The portfolios also allow more dialogue between faculty and students.

Because the program redesign occurred only a few years ago, we cannot yet assess the efficacy of portfolios for students' job or graduate school placements, but we are working with our career resources center and individual members of the regional business community to clarify their expectations of what they would like to see in students' demonstration portfolios.

## CONCLUSIONS

In his November 2011 column for the electronic newsletter of the National Collegiate Honors Council, Greg Lanier, NCHC President, explained the challenges to honors education created by dwindling resources and by the institutionalizing of undergraduate research, which for decades had been the staple of honors education. The fear, Lanier argued, was that the "links to [undergraduate research's] origins in honors have been lost" along with several other significant high-impact practices such as first-year seminars, learning communities, experiential education, and collaborative projects, many of which were first tested in honors classrooms in the 1960s and 1970s. Lanier concluded by challenging honors directors to "find ways to . . . let everyone in academia know how central honors is to the core mission of teaching undergraduates on every campus."

Our argument is that the sustained use of learning portfolios in honors education can provide one avenue for meeting Lanier's challenge. "Portfolio thinking" can help honors faculty discover, reflect upon, and then communicate their programs' identities within their institutions while continuing to

serve as incubators for effective, interdisciplinary curriculum design and student learning. In the spirit of the “Basic Characteristics of a Fully Developed Honors Program,” a movement toward learning portfolios allows the program to maintain its vitality and highlight its purpose within an institution:

The honors program, in distinguishing itself from the rest of the institution, serves as a kind of laboratory within which faculty can try things they have always wanted to try but for which they could find no suitable outlet. When such efforts can be demonstrated to be successful, they may well become institutionalized, thereby raising the general level of education within the college or university for all students. In this connection, the honors curriculum should serve as a prototype for educational practices that can work campus-wide in the future. (NCHC, 2006)

Honors directors, faculty, and staff might justifiably cast critical eyes on frequent calls for innovations in program design. We hear about innovations all the time at conferences, too often from advocates who excel at communicating their latest curricular fads but do not have the depth of experience to know whether the learning outcomes are significantly better than those of the past. However, international research on the use of portfolios in individual courses and programs has affirmed the usefulness of portfolios in higher education settings. The number of portfolio models in honors is growing, thus allowing other programs to individualize projects that meet their needs, values, and campus experiences. We believe that the honors classroom is the ideal place to experiment with portfolios and the deep learning experiences they offer our students and faculty.

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## APPENDIX A

### HONORS PORTFOLIO PROJECTS

Experimentation with reflective learning and portfolios is emerging in honors programs throughout the United States. Portfolio projects and capstone experiences take various forms. Below, we offer several examples and web addresses for more information.

Brigham Young University

<[http://honors.fye.byu.edu/sites/default/files/student\\_files/PortfolioRequirements.pdf](http://honors.fye.byu.edu/sites/default/files/student_files/PortfolioRequirements.pdf)>

Florida International University

<<http://honors.fiu.edu/academics/improvement>>

Heidelberg University

<<http://www.heidelberg.edu/academiclife/distinctive/honors/portfolios>>

Kent State University

<<http://www.kent.edu/honors/academicsandresearch/heo.cfm>>

Miami University

<<http://muhonorsportfolio.blogspot.com>>

San Diego State University

<<http://uhp.sdsu.edu/dus/honors/seniorportfolio.aspx>>

St. Mary's College of Maryland

<<http://www.smcm.edu/nitze/portfolio.html>>

University of Cincinnati

<<http://www.uc.edu/honors/eportfolios.html>>

University of North Dakota

<<http://und.edu/honors-program/shp.cfm>>

University of Washington

<<https://sites.google.com/a/uw.edu/the-honors-portfolio>>